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COUNTRY: USSR
SUBJECT: Comments on Soviet Support of Astronomy
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Source: [REDACTED]

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1. I have been asked to express my opinion as to the reason for the extended support given by the Soviets to the science of astronomy, which is a pure science with little prospect of military or industrial applications. Most of what I have to say is based on conversations and correspondence which I have had with [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] who has had numerous close contacts in the field of astronomy and education officials of the East German Government. According to [REDACTED] the interest in science by Communist Governments, not only Russian, is genuine. We should not assume that all their motives are bad. We should assume that their committees and officers work out programs for education and other planning which appeal to large masses of the people. One way in which the Soviet policy has made great advances in Europe and elsewhere is by educating the masses. I fear that this item is insufficiently understood in the US. The actual appeal which the Soviets have is because of their programs. It is of course true, as anyone knows upon closer examination, that many of these programs are abused to strengthen the power of those in control. So I would say that, in the first place, any promotion of science will be looked upon favorably by the Soviet Government.

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2. The second point is that astronomy deals with ideas and theories which, in the minds of many people, can be used to replace religion. The Soviets have attempted to replace religion by a scientific, or semi-scientific, philosophy colored, of course, by the precepts of dialectical materialism. They have been only partially successful because religion is by no means extinct in Russia. Nevertheless, they seize upon astronomy as an opportunity to strengthen the scientific philosophy which they hold should underlie human actions.

3. A possible third reason is that the dean of Soviet astronomy is Professor G. A. Shajn, Director of the Crimea Observatory. He visited the US in the fall of 1946 and his work is well known in the West. Shajn was closely befriended by Sergei Vavilov, in the past the President of The Russian Academy of Sciences, who in turn had direct access to the ear of Stalin and others of importance in the Soviet hierarchy. It may be presumed, therefore, that the Soviet leaders were impressed through these personal contacts with the importance of astronomy.

4. I can think, perhaps, of one final reason why astronomy is popular in Russia. The Soviets are desirous of developing their optical industry, and astronomy has been a field in which the newest developments of optical design can be utilized to advantage. One should remember that the modified Schmidt-type telescope now in use in various places was developed in Russia by Matsukov in 1941 and that Matsukov was ahead in this respect of similar designs in Holland which took place, I believe, in 1943 and in the US

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I think in the same year. The optical industry in Leningrad has produced some very fine pieces which have been used at the observatory headed by Shajn to produce an atlas of emission nebulae, emission nebulosities in the milky way, of which I acquired two copies during the Rome meetings of the International Astronomical Union in September 1952 and which is of very high quality which has not been surpassed in a similar respect, nor been equaled by work done elsewhere. This is an illustration of the collaboration between the optical industry and astronomical applications.

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